

Patient-Centered Approach Turns Waiting Rooms into Reception Areas

By Ed Rabinowitz
Published on Jan 05, 2009

The office area of your practice where patients sit prior to being called in for their appointment has traditionally been called the waiting room, and with good reason—patients wait there. But waiting, contrary to many patient experiences, does not have to be tedious. In fact, it can be a positive experience.

“We refuse to call it a waiting room,” says Charles Crutchfield, MD, of Egan, MN-based Crutchfield Dermatology. “It’s a reception area, and our receptionist is the director of first impressions. Because when you come into our office, the reception staff and the reception area environment are the first impressions you get.”

Productive time

Kyle Piechucki says he “was bored out of my mind” after spending countless hours waiting in doctors’ offices during his wife’s pregnancies. As a cure for that boredom, Piechucki developed InfoSlate, a thin, handheld device that patients are given when they enter a physician’s office. The device features a browser interface that puts pertinent medical information at patients’ fingertips. It also provides physicians with another opportunity to interact with their patients.

“We extend [physicians’] own in-office marketing campaign onto the platform,” Piechucki says. “Let’s say they want to promote other products or services that they offer. Maybe it’s something like a flu shot or an HPV test in an OB/GYN office. They can announce that through their customized page that allows them to communicate more effectively with the patient, and hopefully [it] generates more revenue for the physician.”

Physicians can also use the devices, which are free for physician offices and are equipped with LoJack Anti-Theft monitoring, as they move from patient to patient. Patients can read about a specific condition while the physician is temporarily out of the room.

Along similar lines, Crutchfield’s reception area is equipped with a large, flat screen plasma television that displays before and after photos of all of the services the practice offers, such as acne treatment, botox and laser treatments. Streaming headlines of the latest news scrolls across the bottom of the screen to help keep patients informed of local and world events. Says Crutchfield, “From a marketing point of view, there really is no better time to let your patients know about the services that you offer than when they’re in your reception area.”

Reading material

Do you know what your patients are reading in your reception area? Are the magazines current? Are the titles of interest? Hank Brown, chief marketing officer for EBSCO Publishing Services Group, says that industry research indicates that approximately 63 percent of patients in reception areas read magazines. Services offered by firms like EBSCO can help keep magazines current while improving office staff productivity.

“We let [physician office customers] know what their peers are ordering,” Brown says. “What are the top 10 or 15 titles with their peers? That’s one way for them to get a feel for what [magazine titles] are appropriate. And we categorize our titles as to whether it’s a financial or a lifestyle magazine, so [physician offices] can choose easily from different categories.”

EBSCO’s services include a one-stop method for handling subscriptions. Instead of receiving renewal notices from 5 or 6 different magazines at different times of the year, EBSCO synchronizes each magazine no matter when the subscription may have started, so one renewal notice is sent for all magazines simultaneously. “You write one check, or make one credit card payment, so your bookkeeping is a little easier,” says Brown.

Getting started

Crutchfield suggests that the best way to begin turning your waiting room into a patient-friendly reception area is by purchasing a magazine rack that will hold about eight different publications, and mounting it to an easily accessed wall in your reception area. Then, survey your staff to determine popular titles for about six magazines and order subscriptions. Fill the remaining two slots with articles on general healthcare or articles you’ve authored.

“Any time there’s an article written about our practice, or I participate in writing an article on skin care, we get reprints of those articles and make them available,” Crutchfield says. Brochures on common health concerns are also readily available through local medical associations.

Last but not least, consider having fresh flowers delivered to your reception area. Crutchfield says it might cost \$10 or \$15 for fresh flowers each week, but they’re a huge hit with patients. “And if you put [the florist’s] business cards by the flowers, they’ll give you a discount because it’s good advertising for them.”

Ed Rabinowitz is a veteran healthcare writer and reporter. He welcomes comments at edwardr@frontiernet.net